

PARENT FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

METHODOLOGY

The SNAP project team identified six sites across Texas for the locations of the 12 focus groups. These locations mirror the geographic and ethnic diversity of the state. Focus groups were conducted in both English and Spanish. The six sites and the number of focus groups at each site are outlined in Table 1. The demographic details about participants are outlined in Table 2.

Table 1: Focus Group Details

Location	Number of Groups
Austin	1
El Paso	2
Fort Worth	2
Houston	2
Rio Grande Valley	2
San Antonio	3

Table 2: Participant Demographic Details

	<i>N</i> = 112	Percentage
Gender		
Male	1	1
Female	111	99
Language		
English	85	76
Spanish	27	24
Ethnicity		
African American	11	10
Caucasian	18	16
Hispanic	78	70
Other	3	3
Refused to answer	2	2



PARTICIPANTS

Participants were recruited by market-research facilities and were paid for their time (approximately two hours). SOSM conducted a total of 12 focus groups and spoke with a total of 112 parents, all but one of whom were mothers. Focus group members were screened to ensure that their socioeconomic status mirrored that of the larger WIC population—that is, that their income was at or below 185% of the federal poverty level and that each of them was the primary caregiver of a child age 10 or under.

A survey distributed to participants at the end of the focus group sessions provided additional information regarding the group demographics, including the following information about those who completed the survey:¹

- Eighty-five percent (92) of these participants use the Internet.
- Eighty-four percent (92) of these participants stated that they visit a WIC website that provides information about fruits and vegetables.
- The majority of these participants (85) access the Internet at their homes.
- The majority of these participants receive services from WIC (83) and Food Stamps (56).
- Almost half of these participants (49) have children who participate in the school lunch or breakfast program.
- Of the 52 participants who receive WIC farmers' market vouchers, 38 indicated that they do in fact use them.

Lines of Inquiry

All focus groups were moderated by professional moderators from SOSM, who employed a consistent guide. Generally, the lines of inquiry focused on the following topics.

- General shopping and food preparation
- Perceptions of “healthy foods”
- Challenges to serving fruits, vegetables, and whole grains
- Field-testing materials

The variations to the guide included a change in the activity engaged in to ascertain what foods parents generally purchase and feed to their families. In the first few focus groups, parents were asked to pick foods from a photo sort. However, SOSM researchers determined that this exercise may limit discussion, so they altered the exercise to have parents write down three meals that they had served to their families in the past week. An additional exercise was incorporated into the focus groups, whereby parents were shown two loaves of bread—one with whole grain and one not—and were asked to indicate which one was the “healthy” bread.

¹ Not all focus group participants chose to complete the survey. The statistics presented reflect the responses of those who did complete the survey.



This exercise was intended as a tool for learning more about participants' knowledge of what constitutes a whole grain. (For full focus group guides, see Appendix C – Instruments)

All focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts and notes were read and organized thematically. An additional round of coding was then conducted to uncover deeper themes and nuances.

Note: Italicized text indicates participants' quotes transcribed verbatim. They are included to illustrate the findings and enhance their credibility.

Limits of Qualitative Research

While quantitative research answers the question “how many” and yields statistical information, qualitative research answers the questions “what,” “why,” and “how.” Qualitative research often yields insights into issues that should be quantified later. Qualitative findings from the interviews and focus groups were transcribed, categorically coded, and analyzed for content, themes, experiences, and opinions. Readers are cautioned to remember the limits of qualitative research: Findings should be considered directional, not statistically definitive.

Questionnaire Data

During the focus groups, participants also completed a questionnaire so that their experiences and knowledge could be quantified as well. The questionnaire followed lines of inquiry related to field-testing materials, Internet use, and SNAP services.

FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

General Shopping and Food Preparation

For the icebreaker exercise, participants were asked to finish the sentence, “The biggest problem I face when planning meals for my family is_____.”

This question yielded robust data, since specific responses to the question provided unprompted insights into whether parents are aware of or struggle with the concept of providing healthy meals for their children. The responses also highlighted themes that were to remain at the center of conversation throughout the each focus group discussion. Respondents not only articulated the challenges and struggles they face in providing healthy foods to their families, but the anecdotes they shared provided additional validity to these everyday struggles. The expressed themes revealed participant concern with the following issues.

- Preparing multiple meals to satisfy various family members
- Knowing how to cook healthy foods
- Having time to cook
- Having a variety of recipes



- Pleasing picky eaters
- Managing dietary concerns caused by a health crisis such as obesity or diabetes

Many parents grapple with how best to feed their families within the realities of a budget, picky eaters, full-time jobs, and simply not knowing and understanding what a healthy option is.

And my problem is, one wants one thing, the other wants another, and I have two boys that don't eat vegetables. I don't even know how to present it to them, because they don't want them anyway.

The biggest challenge I face when planning meals is, I want her to be healthy, but I don't really know what's healthy. There are so many different articles about it, but they all contradict each other and I get confused.

Responses indicate that many parents are indeed aware of the need to serve healthy foods to their families but struggle to find ways to do it. The struggles reflected in the following responses from two focus group participants were echoed by many others in groups throughout the state.

... And my main concern is how to get them to eat vegetables. They don't eat vegetables. They don't like them.

I have three kids, 12, 10, and 6. And not too different than anybody else, it reverts to what are the kids going to eat, and is it healthy. My husband and I just got diagnosed with diabetes, and so now we need to figure out how we can control our diet and our blood sugars that way, and have smaller portion sizes. That's our new challenge.

Typical Meals and Snacks

Many parents perceive the meals they provide as well-balanced and healthy. Participants expressed their intention to provide healthy meals; however, their descriptions of the meals they serve indicated limited knowledge of what constitutes a healthy meal. Discrepancies between the intent to provide healthy meals for their families and the actuality of what they serve is an indicator of the limited knowledge participants have regarding cooking healthy foods and having a variety of recipes.

Sunday dinner and I have, like, an asterisk around that because that's the meal that I try to have more nutritious foods or items. For Sunday dinner we have baked chicken, green beans, mashed potatoes with brown gravy, and creamed corn. Throughout the rest of the week it's either takeout pizza, Ben Miller's, or Church's Chicken.



When I really cook, he's like, "You're the best mommy ever." So that's one thing I tell my friends. If you want to keep them grateful, feed them chicken nuggets all the time. And they're good for them, and they'll love them.

However, some parents did share some “tricks of the trade” about serving healthier foods to their families. They employ tactics such as “hiding” and substituting healthier foods when possible—for example, vegetables are hidden in spaghetti sauce and turkey sausage is substituted for pork or beef.

I like to buy the turkey dogs instead of the real hotdogs because my kids like them just as well with chips ...

Non-Hispanic parent groups tended to rely on foods such as frozen pizza, chicken nuggets, macaroni and cheese, spaghetti, and fish sticks, while Hispanic parents tended to rely heavily on traditional fare such as *caldo* (a soup or broth generally made with meat), stews, enchiladas, and tacos. There was little mention of fast-food restaurants among Hispanic participants, while members of the non-Hispanic focus groups frequently mentioned their reliance on meals from fast-food restaurants. One participant of mixed Anglo-Hispanic background aptly described differences between the Hispanic and non-Hispanic populaces with the following statement:

The American family is like hotdogs, hamburgers, whatever is easy, and the Mexican is, you have to get in the kitchen and cook.

Participants mentioned *caldo*, tacos, rice, meats, stews, chicken nuggets, Hamburger Helper, spaghetti, potatoes, pizza, and vegetables (green beans, baby carrots, tomatoes, and peas) as the most common foods they serve.

On the other hand, parents know when they are serving unhealthy snacks such as chips, soda, and cookies, and when they are serving healthier alternatives such as baby carrots, fruit, yogurt, and cheese sticks. Although traditional junk foods were frequently mentioned as snack items, parents also listed snacks that were truly healthy and not just perceived as such.

That's mostly where my kids get their fruits and vegetables are from snacks normally. When I cook stuff, I don't put a side of fruit or whatever. It's when they're snacking, they'll get grapes or apples or bananas of something like that.

My kids eat apples and oranges.

... Cottage cheese and fruit. Yeah, my children like them because I have a garden in the back, and they are growing cantaloupe and watermelon. They really like it because we go harvest it, and then they eat it from there. And yogurt. I try not to bring any chips or soda waters like potato chips and things like that. No, no, and the children in my house do not drink coke or anything.



I'm like bad ... I have chips and Doritos ... My daughter, she's still one, so she's not really into all that junky food.

Planning

Except with rare exceptions, most participants do not plan meals in advance. Many parents return home after a full day's work and consider cooking as another chore to be checked off the list.

... And then I kind of plan menus. Nobody else said that, so I feel weird saying that, but I plan menus for the week...

We do good, we'll plan for about two weeks, and then we just totally forget, and then it's like, "What are we having?"

However, those who do plan in advance spoke about purchasing sale items and then using those items in different meals throughout the week.

One of the things that makes me decide is, let's say that we went to the store and he saw these pork chops on sale, so he buys like a million pounds of pork chops. So it's like, guess what, we're having pork chops.

Thirty minutes or less, any longer and I can't help you. I mean, you know, I don't get home until 6:00 by the time you pick up from school and day care. And we do homework, and I'm trying to cook at the same time, and do baths, and go to bed. So it's got to be 30 minutes or less, something quick.

In each focus group, participants were divided between those who solicit family input for meal choices and those who do not. Those who do solicit family input ask their children because it is easier and there is some level of confidence that the food will be eaten. Those who do not solicit input indicated that their children will only ask for unhealthy foods. Additionally, some women indicated that they tailor meals not only to their children but to their husbands as well.

You asked me how do I plan? I walk her to the freezer and say, "What do you want to eat?" Because if I just cook it, she won't eat it, but if I let her pick it, it may be the same thing, but it's okay.



How Parents Were Taught to Cook

The vast majority of respondents said they were taught how to cook by their mothers, either through active participation or by watching, seeing, eating, and tasting the food over and over again during their formative years. A handful of participants indicated that they learned how to cook from asking friends, by trial and error, or from magazines. Only one participant indicated that she learned how to cook from an organization, which was WIC.

I called Grandma or called Mom and asked, “How do you fix this? What’s the recipe for this?”

I learned just seeing my mom

I think everything I eat is what my mother or father used to cook.

This finding is noteworthy because it seemingly lays the foundation for participants’ understanding the importance of modeling behavior for their children. However, many parents shared anecdotes about the negative food choices their children make without expressing the idea that they can change these choices.

We take nutrition classes because they’re available, but it’s hard when you go and get the WIC and the cereal that you get is not the cereal that my children will eat. If they do eat it, they add tons of sugar to it. The milk, they add the Nestlé Quik chocolate to it. The cheese, they don’t eat it, they don’t eat the cheese. The beans, they don’t eat them. It’s given to me, and the juices I get, they don’t like it. They want Kool-Aid, or they want Coke.

When specifically asked about the influence of WIC or other organizations on their food choices, many parents spoke of learning healthy eating concepts such as choosing low-fat milk, appropriate serving sizes, the amount of fruits and vegetables to be served, and substituting turkey for beef. Conversely, participants mentioned that they do not learn recipes or preparation methods from WIC.

Not so much recipes, but they’ll tell you, like, what’s good to give them, as far as, like, what has iron and what has vitamin C and that good stuff.

I was on WIC for a while and you would learn basic nutrition, but not really how to prepare. Feed them fruits and vegetables, but don’t hand them, like, a raw squash.

I am on WIC right now, but they don’t really show you how to cook. They tell you that your kids need vegetables. Your kids need milk. They need protein.

Now, it’s like the computers, and they [WIC] don’t give you like, “This is a sample. Taste it” anymore.



When further prompted to discuss how they learn about new recipes, participants put forward a variety of sources, including cooking magazines (specifically *Kraft*, *Quick & Easy*, and *Southern Living*), searching the Internet for recipes, especially Crock-Pot recipes, watching cooking shows on stations such as the Food Channel, and taste-testing new recipes at supermarkets. These ideas generated a lot of excitement in the groups, with conversations erupting around the magazines and shows participants had in common and seemed to enjoy watching. A typical conversation is transcribed below. (Note: After for the first three utterances, it became impossible to determine which respondent was speaking. These respondents are not identified by number.)

Respondent 1: *I watch channel 47. It's the Food Channel. I love that.*

Moderator: *So you're watching the cooking shows. Anyone else? – Everyone's shaking their head.*

Respondent 2: *I have a husband that mainly watches that.*

Respondent: *That's my husband.*

Respondent: *You learn a lot from there. They come out with good recipes from that. Really, honestly.*

Respondent: *A lot of the times it's also healthy recipes, too, because it's more homemade.*

Respondent: *And it's herbs and spices, right? It's not dull, like plain. It's more flavored.*

School as an Influence

The vast majority of parents expressed disappointment, frustration, and other negative feelings regarding school lunches. Parents reported that many children come home from school hungry because the lunches are not adequate or are served too early in the day. Beyond the factors of quantity and time of day served, parents believe that the quality of the food is poor and that poor eating habits are compounded and perhaps initiated by the types of foods served in school cafeterias across Texas. Most parents indicated that their children did not like the food served at school.

I think it has a hugely negative influence on the kids—the way they do things at school. But if you think about it, five days a week for twelve years, they're eating crap. The way it's structured, and then of course they're influenced by all the kids around them. So I think as parents, it's our obligation to ultimately change our eating habits—kind of, like, prepare their food with more, you know, be more conscious about it, because the way the obesity rate is in kids now, and just the way society is nowadays ...



... one of [my children] who refuses to purchase her lunch at school because it's absolutely horrible. The other one, he purchases one to eat, but he's so hungry when he gets home because there's not enough.

Oh yeah, the meat is like cardboard.

My son says he eats at school, but I think he goes and buys like the sugary snacks or the chips, because he doesn't like the way the food tastes.

The few who did make positive comments regarding school lunches focused on the value these lunches had in introducing their children to more food choices.

For my son, it was really good. He never tried anything new and he started school this past February, and they have really good meals through Arlington. They have a special, I don't know, but he started eating more vegetables and different things.

When my oldest went to kindergarten, she branched out a lot more. She wouldn't eat hotdogs. She wouldn't eat hamburgers. We didn't eat a lot of that stuff anyway, but that's what they serve at school. She wouldn't eat ketchup, so she was more willing to try new things because she ate different things at school.

Children as Helpers in the Store

Most parents stated that they do not like to bring their children with them to the grocery store. The problem, as many parents pointed out, is that the grocery bill gets much higher when they bring children along and the children generally prefer to select foods that the parents do not want them to have. Parents who do bring their children shopping with them stated that they do so because they have no choice. Few parents spoke of bringing their children shopping with them as a means to educate them about healthy foods or the best value.

I don't have the patience. Taking four kids to the store is like, you might as well shoot yourself. I always have one to say, "Mom, could we just try this new thing?" Before you know it, you've got seven new things to try in your basket ...

I don't take mine. They want to start taking things, and grabbing things.

I take mine shopping with me because it teaches them this is how you do it, this is what it's going to cost. You're females, so you're going to be doing this not too long from now.



Perceptions of Healthy Foods

Most participants appeared to understand which foods are healthy and which are not. When asked specifically to share the healthiest foods they cook for their families, most respondents were quick to list healthy items such as fish, red meat, chicken, vegetables, lentils, cheese, baked fish, turkey, and fruits. However, several responses indicate that parents may not know how to prepare these foods in a healthy way, since parents described healthy foods prepared or served in an unhealthy fashion.

My children like strawberries but not by themselves. I have to put a little bit of cool whip or a little bit of sugar so they'll be a little bit more juicy and sweet, and they'll eat them.

My kids like salad too, but they just throw a bottle of ranch on it, and then the croutons, though. But at least they eat the salad, too.

And broccoli, with butter of course, so that takes the healthy out of it.

Chicken too. Like the chicken fried steak with the mashed potatoes and the green beans.

As mentioned previously, parents understand the importance of serving healthier foods to their children. When asked about the benefits of eating healthier foods, they mentioned “gives them more energy,” “not to turn overweight,” “diabetes,” “cholesterol,” and “they prevent health diseases.”

Milk Consumption

Most participants spoke of serving their children low-fat milk, which, according to their comments, means 2%, 1%, or fat-free milk, with the majority serving 2% milk. Parents spoke of learning from WIC or their pediatricians when it was time to switch from whole milk to a lower fat milk. The general consensus was that their children will drink the 2% milk but complain that skim milk is too watery.

Moderator: How many give 2%? And some of them are too little. How did you switch it, or did you make a switch?

Respondent 1: Well, they were gaining weight, so they switched it at WIC.

Respondent 2: I give them 2% because I always try to watch their fats, and that's why I give them 2%.

Respondent 3: The same, because of the fat.

Moderator: Was it hard to make an adjustment? Some are saying yes?



Respondent 4: *My husband and my daughter didn't like it at the beginning.*

Moderator: *How did you do it?*

Respondent 4: *They didn't have anything else to drink, so they had to drink that one, and I drink skim, and then they don't have theirs, and there's only mine. They don't drink it because they say it's just water.*

Whole Grain Consumption

The conversations around consumption of whole grains were robust, with participants readily identifying what they believe whole grains to be; acknowledging the importance of serving whole grains; sharing which whole-grain products they have tried; and the specific challenges they've faced with serving whole grains.

Respondents generally said they thought whole grains were a healthier option and listed the whole grains of which they were aware, including lentils, whole wheat pastas, cereals, oatmeal, rice, and bread. Some reportedly struggle with the taste of whole grains in products other than cereals and breads. The perceived cost of whole grain bread was mentioned several times.

Oh, no, that bread is so expensive.

It is a lot more expensive.

I have flour, but unfortunately it's just staying there because when I try to find foods, which I limit that, for instance like pork chops, when I try to find pork chops with the wheat flour, it doesn't get eaten. No, unfortunately, they won't eat it.

I tried the wheat pasta, and they didn't like it.

For my kids, mostly just the cereal.

There was discussion in several of the focus groups as to the merits of whole grains for the digestive system, and parents seemed quite in tune to their children's digestive issues.

I notice that my kid's bodies just function better. They're not constipated because a lot of times kids have that, and they tend to stay very regular ...

When shown two loaves of bread—one that was 100% whole wheat and another that had “whole wheat” on the label but was not 100% whole wheat—most participants indicated that the 100% whole wheat bread was the better option and the one that they purchased. Some participants did not know to look for “100% whole wheat flour” on the bread label to determine whether it is whole grain or not. A couple of participants were confused as to whether the “G” for General Mills means “whole grain.”



Many participants spoke about switching to whole grains as they try to make healthier food choices. These participants said they were motivated to change their behavior because of pressing or potential health concerns for their children, such as obesity, high cholesterol, diabetes, and in some cases issues of self-esteem related to weight.

Parents have more success introducing whole grains such as cereals, whole wheat breads, and buns, and have a harder time introducing whole-grain pasta and brown rice.

Like hamburger buns and hotdog buns, they're whole wheat now. And we get those, and they're good. I mean, she don't taste the difference.

I tried it and they didn't like it. I tried the wheat spaghetti, and they didn't like it.

Challenges to Serving Fruits, Vegetables, and Whole Grains

When asked to identify the challenges of serving healthier options such as fruits, vegetables, and whole grains to their families, participants readily identified the obstacles they face. Throughout the conversation, many parents expressed a strong desire to make positive changes and shared anecdotes about how they have attempted to incorporate healthier options into their families' food choices.

Time. Planning and preparation go hand in hand, as many of the challenges noted by the participants related to time. Few participants indicated that they plan a menu prior to the day they serve it. Some indicated that they make preparations in the morning, such as defrosting meat. However, the majority of participants spoke of getting to the end of the day and being faced with hungry children. Their solution is to quickly serve foods that are convenient and take little time to prepare, or to go out for fast food. Participants expressed a desire for “fast” and prepackaged options with fresh produce, and some spoke of the time commitment necessary to chop vegetables. Many participants shared the sense that it takes longer to prepare healthier foods.

It's easier sometimes. You're running all day, and then all of a sudden, you know you don't have time to make the big old meatloaf, mashed potatoes, the salad: “You know what? Time's running out. Let's just go buy Jack in the Box.

Groceries, versus going to McDonald's and getting the fries and the drink and a hot and spicy McChicken, you know, for each a dollar. Versus having to go to the grocery store, buying the groceries, going home to cook and then having to clean up, versus you going to McDonald's and getting everything cheaper and you don't have to clean.



Sometimes time too. Time, because there are so many days—I end up feeding them McDonald's all the time. I don't want to be like that. I don't.

Or white rice, fifteen minutes, versus brown rice, an hour.

Cost. Parents perceive healthier food options to be more costly. This issue elicited much discussion and was readily identified as a barrier by many participants, whether the perceived increased cost was associated with purchasing fresh produce, purchasing whole-grain breads, making more frequent trips to the store, or waste associated with the perceived short shelf life of fresh produce.

If I want grapes and they're \$2.49, I'm not buying it. If it's \$1.49 or \$1.79, I'll buy it.

You have to go to the grocery more often. With staples, rice and stuff, you only have to go like every two or three weeks. Like, fruits and vegetables have to be bought more often, and more trips to the store means more money.

Most participants prefer to serve fresh produce over either canned or frozen because they perceive fresh produce to be healthier. However, the associated storage requirement is a challenge that participants identified as cost prohibitive. Parents spoke of having good intentions and purchasing fresh vegetables and fruits, but then not using them in time and finding them spoiled. If they are not able to provide fresh produce, participants appear to be more willing to purchase frozen vegetables (as opposed to canned) than frozen or canned fruit.

... I think that, like, the fresh vegetables and all of that, they go bad. The fresh fruits, the storage, the shelf life ...

I think the canned is a little easier, but I'd rather have the frozen and fresh. It tastes better either frozen or fresh.

Some parents felt that it was worth the additional cost to serve healthier foods. Many participants shared strategies for providing healthier foods on a budget, including coupon clipping, going to stores that match the best prices, buying in bulk, serving fewer healthier meals, and purchasing fewer fresh fruits and vegetables.

I try to give my daughter natural vegetables, but I buy frozen foods for my husband and I because those are the ones my husband likes. But for my daughter, she's little and she's barely eating, so I buy her the natural.



It's like I'm trying to do two healthy meals in a week instead of wanting to do five or six. I have to do less because it's a lot more expensive, and I think that may be why a lot of people may not choose to go that route, because it's more expensive.

Taste. The taste of healthy foods, particularly vegetables, is something that parents struggle with. Most feel that fruits and whole-grain breads are palatable to their children, but when it comes to vegetables they appear to be at a loss for how to cook them. A few parents indicated that they themselves do not like many vegetables and therefore do not serve them to their children. As was mentioned earlier, many parents indicated that they tried to introduce whole-grain pastas and brown rice to their families, with mixed reactions. Few parents serve these whole-grain products.

My kids get off of their vegetables and they won't eat them, they'll just leave them. I think our dogs are healthier than everybody else because our dogs get the vegetables. They get the leftovers, and it's like rice and vegetables.

A few parents associated the challenges associated with taste to creating new habits and simply not being used to the taste of the healthier options.

I would say it's like getting used to the taste.

I guess trying to get used to not always getting, like, the pizzas and the hamburgers, getting more used to getting the healthier foods, getting out of your old habits.

Concerns and confusion about “health” foods, “healthy” foods, and “organic” foods. With further prompting, participants discussed their concerns and perceptions about brand-name versus generic products, pesticides and chemicals, and organic foods.

Quality of produce and brand-name versus generic products. Responses varied as to whether participants found the produce in their local shopping places to be fresh. Many spoke of going to different stores so that they could get the freshest produce. Some participants shop at corner vegetable markets, but very few indicated that they go to either a flea market or a farmers' market to purchase their produce when not motivated by the WIC vouchers. The perception that brand-name items are better and of higher quality than generic items was expressed in several of the focus groups.

The taste of the food, it's different, from expensive brands to cheap brands. Sometimes it is different. Like just simply cheese. The WIC cheese tastes different than Kraft cheese or Velveeta. It's way different, and it's more expensive.



“Organic.” Many participants perceived “healthier” to mean organic. There was much discussion about the prevalence of chemicals and pesticides in foods. It should be noted that focus groups were conducted during the summer of 2008, when the Federal Department of Agriculture issued a recall of Texas tomatoes due to an outbreak of disease and investigated whether the outbreak was due to contamination from Mexican produce.

The vegetables now, they have organic, and they’re more expensive. If you want the fruit to be healthier, it costs more.

The healthy organic stuff is very expensive; I don’t buy a lot, just a little of it. If the tomato is very expensive I buy less.

Lack of practical knowledge. Participants indicated that the challenge they face in preparing healthy foods and changing eating patterns within their families is simply that they do not know how to do this. They struggle with wanting to do better for their children yet lack the tools to actualize that desire. The conversation below exemplifies this struggle.

Respondent 1: *I think just knowledge how to do it. I mean, I know how to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich; that’s simple. But, I don’t know a lot of times to do an alternative, easy ... and I’m sure they’re out there. I’m positive they’re out there. I just wasn’t raised that way. We had rice and all of that kind of stuff. Hamburger Helper was my mom’s specialty. So I think just lack of knowledge, of knowing what do to for me, how to do it.*

Respondent 2: *I want to say education. Because the biggest problem I hear with everyone is that they really want to do it, but life is life. You have to pay your bills, and you have to feed your family. That’s your priority, so everything else falls to the wayside. I feel like if we had more programs to educate women, to feed their families, cheaper, healthier, and quicker, because there’s a way, you just have to know. If you don’t know, you just don’t know. A lot of people are not offering that advice to women ... I feel like our government gives us a lot of stuff about not being healthy and not doing the healthy thing, but I don’t really think that they’re educating us to be healthy consumers. They’re not educating us to educate our children. They don’t even educate children in school; they do small things at school about nutrition. But, they really don’t break it down.*

Additionally, during the conversation regarding obesity, respondents pointed to portion size and food choices as areas with which they and their children struggle. Many parents shared stories of children who eat large portions, prefer “junk food,” and are overweight. Parents spoke of trying to model behavior for their children by decreasing the amount of snacks, pizza, and



hamburgers they purchase. However, a sense of powerlessness was present as an undercurrent throughout these conversations. Parents take the steps of encouraging their children to go outside, put snacks on higher shelves so children cannot reach them, and limit the amount of cookies or bread, but when met with an obstacle (such as a child saying he or she prefers to watch television), the parent does not know how to follow through and ensure that her child actually turns off the television and heads outside. Most parents know what needs to be done, yet in many of the groups parents shared that their children are overweight or struggling with diabetes and they are not effectively controlling the situation.

I find it harder for my kids. Only one is overweight. My four year old, he's overweight. He's supposed to be weighing 37 pounds, but he weighs 81 pounds, so he's a big boy ... and so it's hard for me to get him to go outside and play because he fights with me, saying he doesn't want to do it and he wants to watch TV... He loves going to the refrigerator and grabbing whatever, and if he can't get it, he puts a chair and he puts it in the pantry and he'll climb until he gets what he wants.

... My kids are constantly just sitting in front of the television, playing their video games and the computer and such, and I'm constantly telling them, "Let's go for a walk!" "We will in a minute, mom." And it's always later, later, later, so you know it just truly troubles me, because they're not as active as they were when they were in school.

I think portions are a big deal. My eight-year-old is very, he likes to eat ... I mean, when we do have McDonald's, they come out with this Mighty Kids meal, which is now two patties instead of one patty. Like CiCi's Pizza is very, very kid-promoted, and it's a buffet. My son feels like he needs to, you know, it's just so much out there. So those kinds of things just have to minimize because it's part of our life. I'm not going to deny it. My kids eat at McDonald's every so often, but I feel like the portions of it are just—I eat kids' meals, and I feel like that's enough for me. By my eight-year-old's portions are a big deal, just how much they're saying is for a kid.

How Children Learn About Nutrition

Children learn about nutrition either from their parents or in school. While some respondents indicated that they do not teach their children about nutrition and do not know if their children are learning about it, many other parents are aware that their children are learning about nutrition in school and stated that they themselves teach their children about nutrition. Coaches, teachers, classroom exercises, and school initiatives were mentioned as influences for teaching nutrition to children.

... And the coaches from school. The coaches, that's a preacher for them. They can even say, "We want us going to Subway now. No more Whataburger. No more fried chicken. No more things like that."



They give them hotdogs and pizza. That is true, but on the other hand, they also teach them. The Northside Independent School District has a monkey. It's an animal, and it says this is red and yellow. The red you cannot eat too much of it because you can only eat it once a week ...

The parents who do teach their children about nutrition may repeat what they've heard on commercials and may point out healthier options. Respondents struggling with a health issue such as diabetes mentioned that their children and grandchildren know which foods they (the parents and grandparents) can and cannot eat and will copy that behavior by eating the "permitted" foods and abstaining from the "forbidden" foods as well. Some parents spoke of a specific family member who leads by example and has a positive influence on the children's eating habits.

My husband. They'll see him eating some and they say, "Oh, Dad, I want some." They eat it and then they realize that even if it's not good, he's still going to eat it because that's what he chooses to eat But, regardless, when the girls see Daddy eating something, they're going to eat it too.

One parent said that she did not teach her children about nutrition because she did not know why certain foods are healthy.

I really don't take the time to tell them because, you know, I really don't know what, why carrots are good for you. I just know you have to eat them.

Farmers' Markets and Vouchers

Respondents who noticed and purposefully purchased locally grown produce were in a small minority. Fewer than half of the focus group participants had been to a farmers' market. Most of those who had been to one were motivated by the WIC vouchers they received. Almost all of the focus groups included at least one person who was aware of the concept of buying locally grown produce and who spoke about how the food may be "fresher" and have fewer pesticides. However, many were confused as to what "locally grown" means, with some participants thinking it meant "grown in the United States or Mexico." One participant thought it meant an HEB product over a brand product. Still others indicated that locally grown food was not a priority over the perceived additional cost of purchasing this produce. Many simply had never noticed or thought about where their food was grown.

I don't go out of my way to look for it, no. I go pick blackberries from a local grower once a year, but it's not really heavy on my mind.

Moderator: So, does your store mark what's locally grown?

Respondent 1: I haven't seen it.

Respondent 2: I don't think so.

Responded 3: I don't really pay attention.



I know my grapes come from Chile, because it says it on the little tag, but that's the only one I know about.

No respondents in Houston or McAllen remembered receiving vouchers from WIC. San Antonio and El Paso had the most voucher recipients, with nine at each location, indicating that they received vouchers. Some participants equated purchasing produce from a stand on the side of the highway with purchasing from a farmers' market. It was common for participants to shop at a farmers' markets because they received the vouchers and did not want to waste the money by not going.

Moderator: *How many of you have been to a farmers' market? If you've been to a farmers' market, raise your hand. Nine. Okay, nine people. And what prompted you to go to the farmers' market?*

Respondent: *Coupons.*

However, a few women did indicate they “wasted” their vouchers because the farmers' market was too inconvenient. Conversely, a few women indicated that they shop at the farmers' market regardless of whether they received vouchers or not. At least one respondent articulated that although she does not always use the vouchers, they did help her focus on the concept of fresh fruits and vegetables, and she tried to purchase fresh wherever possible.

Respondent: *I did a few times. Like the last two times, I was unable to use them because it goes back to time.*

Moderator: *How has it influenced?*

Respondent: *I think that's what got me started to shop at farmers' markets and stuff like that.*

Moderator: *What do you mean, “stuff like that?”*

Respondent: *Like the fresher vegetables and fresher fruits. That's what got me started into it, so there I started getting fresh fruits from Wal-Mart or wherever I could get them, as that was quicker for me and more convenient.*

Those who have shopped at farmers' markets spoke highly of the fresher and tastier produce, as well as the cheaper cost.

Besides not knowing where farmers' markets are located and when they operate, the top-of-mind barriers enumerated by respondents include the inconvenience of shopping at two places and going the extra distance to the farmers' market. When prompted further regarding distance, it became apparent that this is a prevalent barrier. Most respondents were interested in going to a farmers' market, at least to see what it offered, if distance were not an issue and there were a farmers' market no farther away from them than their grocery store. Reasons for



going to a farmers' market, if there were one no farther away than the grocery store, include fresher and cheaper food. A few respondents still would not be motivated to go to the farmers' market even if it were an equal distance away, citing the inconvenience of shopping at two places.

Obesity

The topic of obesity and related health concerns was discussed in each of the focus groups. In some groups the conversation turned to obesity as soon as questions regarding healthy choices were posed at the beginning of the session, indicating that this is a very real concern for parents. Regardless of when it came up in conversation or whether it came up spontaneously or after prompting by the moderator, parents were quick to join this discussion and to share their concerns about physical activity, portion size, self-esteem associated with weight, and specific related health concerns, such as diabetes, high cholesterol, and high blood pressure. Many parents are dealing with obesity or obesity-related health issues themselves and are working to incorporate better practices into the their families' eating habits, for themselves and for their children.

My concerns are the future health, how their life-long longevity, the teasing at school if they do become fat, you know, just their health period. I mean, people are dying younger and younger of heart disease and heart attacks, and stuff that could be prevented by just their health, yes.

I have a 12-year-old and seeing her deal with the self-esteem issues. She went from a women's size 10 into a women's size this past year. I was like, "Holy cow, that's bigger than me." And I'm very concerned.

Also the cholesterol, just of the pizza and the hamburgers. We had a lot of kids with the diabetes already, first graders, second graders.



Physical Activity: How Much Is Enough, and Is It Safe?

Concern about physical activity was mixed. Many parents expressed concern about their children's level of physical activity, while others expressed satisfaction in this regard. One parent indicated that she felt her children get physical activity by playing interactive video games like Wii. Likewise, responses were mixed regarding whether children have a safe place to play. Some parents are concerned about their neighborhoods, but others stated that their children have a safe place to play. The Houston focus group participants expressed more neighborhood safety concerns than participants in other areas. For the most part, parents indicated that if their young child is playing outside, they must be there to observe. Many parents who pay for organized activities, camps, or day care indicated that their young children partake in enough physical activity at these places. Some parents take their children to indoor playgrounds such as Chuck E. Cheese's or McDonald's so that they have a safe place to play. A couple of parents indicated that they were less than pleased with the level of physical activity offered in the schools and wanted their children to have more frequent, more rigorous activity at school.

When my daughter's outside, I'm out there with her. I don't let her go wander outside.

We go walk every night at 7:30, because there's a show that I watch. As soon as it's over we'll go walk at least for 45 minutes.

They're safe.

Field Test of Materials

Toward the end of each focus group session, the moderator introduced several materials to field-test with the parents in order to learn what may motivate them to try healthy alternative recipes and introduce healthier food options into their families' diets, and how they would like to receive this information. Participants ranked their responses to two commercials on the scales provided on a worksheet distributed by the moderator. Materials are discussed below in the order in which they were presented. Copies of each of the materials may be found in Appendix D – Focus Group Materials.



Website. Participants were provided with a colored printout of the home page of a website entitled *championsforchange.net* and were asked to share their top-of-mind impressions of the home page, as well as any additional information they would like to see on the website.

Parents generally responded well to the home page of the *Champions for Change* website and were quickly able to understand its purpose, which is to educate parents about healthier food choices. They expressed interest in the information they expected to find on the site. The colors were pleasing. A few participants indicated that they did not like the website home page because there were too many words on it. One person indicated that the picture contradicted the message because the family members on the home page are overweight.

I would do the Internet. As a matter of fact, I was looking at it and I was like, I'd click on the "My Kitchen" [tab] first, and come up with ideas. Because sometimes I feel like I run out of ideas ...

Respondents shared many ideas about preferred website content. The most common ideas had to do with recipes that are "realistic," have few ingredients, and are "practical, healthy and inexpensive"; and information on local resources, such as farmers' markets and "free and low-cost activities" to do with their children. Other ideas mentioned are listed below.

- Information about how to "realistically make some of these changes" and how to make "easy changes"
- Testimonials from other parents who have made changes and have information to share
- Information on pricing, specifically related to local comparison shopping
- A list of activities under the *Be Active* tab that families can participate in at low or no cost
- Nutritional information

Some respondents indicated that they visit various websites in search of easy, affordable menu options. Specific websites mentioned include *kraft.com*, *recipe.com*, *familyfun.go.com*, and the Texas Department of Agriculture's website at <http://www.agr.state.tx.us>. One parent mentioned a website with a tool that allows the user to input ingredients and then provides a recipe containing those ingredients. Other parents in her group appeared interested in this resource. While she could not recall the name of the specific website, a subsequent Internet search by researchers yielded *recipematcher.com* as a site that has this tool.

The majority of respondents indicated that they would visit a website such as *championsforchange.net*. Responses varied when participants were asked whether or not they would like to receive a weekly e-mail with recipes after signing up on such a website. Some participants thought this was a good idea, while others indicated the e-mail would get lost in their in-boxes.



Television Advertisement 1: Champions for Change, Mom in Kitchen. This short advertisement features a mother in her kitchen speaking about how she is in charge of her kitchen, including the food that goes in and out of it. She encourages the viewer to take charge and make healthy choices for her family.

The majority of participants responded positively to this advertisement. The participants saw the mother in the commercial as being “like us.” The concept of being in charge of one’s own kitchen and the mention of diabetes appealed to this audience. For some in the Hispanic community, the religious items in the picture made them feel that the mother in the video was “just like” them. When asked, the vast majority of participants said they found the advertisement to be either somewhat or very “catchy.” While most participants did not learn anything new, they were motivated by the advertisement to eat more fruits and vegetables.

You hear about it [diabetes], you know what is involved about it, but when you hear somebody else saying that, it’s like, I have to make the change, I need to.

1. How “catchy” is it?	Percentage of Respondents (N = 83)
Not catchy at all	5
Somewhat catchy	46
Very catchy	49
2. Did it offer a new idea or new information you did not know before?	
Yes	35
No	55
Unsure	10
3. How much does this television advertisement motivate you to eat more fruits and vegetables?	
Doesn’t motivate me	13
Might motivate me	36
Probably would motivate me to eat more fruits and vegetables	51



Television Advertisement 2: Champions for Change, Community Change.

This short advertisement features community members working to improve the food choices at their neighborhood grocery store and school and encouraging viewers to take action to ensure that there are healthier food options for their own families.

Responses to the Community Change advertisement were more varied than those to the advertisement with the mother in the kitchen. Some respondents were uncomfortable with the idea of acting as advocates, and others thought it was unrealistic to think that they could influence change at their children's schools. Two mothers recounted that they did attempt to influence change, one at her child's school (unsuccessfully) and one at her grocery store (successfully). However, respondents indicated that they learned new information from the advertisement that may motivate them to eat more fruits and vegetables.

I thought the second one was a little, I don't know, wishful thinking on some parts, because I don't know if anybody's going to go down and complain to the school. They're just going to go, "Okay whatever." It's regulated by the state.

1. How "catchy" is it?	Percentage of Respondents (N= 83)
Not catchy at all	7
Somewhat catchy	60
Very catchy	33
2. Did it offer a new idea or new information you did not know before?	
Yes	47
No	43
Unsure	10
3. How much does this TV advertisement motivate you to eat more fruits and vegetables?	
Doesn't motivate me	18
Might motivate me	41
Probably would motivate me to eat more fruits and vegetables	41



Cookbook: *Let's Cook with Fruits and Vegetables*. Without exception, in every focus group participants expressed enthusiasm for this cookbook.² Participants responded positively to the fact that the recipes are in English and in Spanish, the ingredients are simple and appear to not take a long time to prepare, nutritional information is provided, and the recipes are accompanied by pictures. A conversation typical of many focus group sessions follows.

Respondent 1: *Oh, look, some of that soupy pasta!*

Respondent 2: *Oh, all of this looks really tasty.*

Respondent 3: *Could we make copies of this one? Could we take it with us? Are you going to give it to us?*

Respondent 4: *Everything!*

Zobey Children's Activity book: *A Trip to Bugland*. Parents responded well to this activity book. They thought their children would be attracted to the character on the front cover and that they would want to prepare the recipes in the back of the book. Few of the participants were familiar with the booklet and indicated that they had not received it from WIC. One participant shared that she has a video with these characters and that her children "love it" and want to eat what the characters are eating on the video.

There are recipes in the book. They love little stuff like that. My kids will look back there and go, "Oh, I want to make that."

Respondent Suggestions

Respondents offered a variety of suggestions on how to motivate them and their children to include more healthy foods in their diets. The most frequent suggestions include changing school menus, increasing advertisements of health foods, and holding food demonstrations. Many parents suggested that change must include the schools. They feel their children are not offered a variety of healthy foods in the schools and that there is too much breaded and unhealthy food available to children at school.

Parents liked the commercials they were shown as part of the field test and lamented the fact that they don't see commercials like that very often. One mother articulated this theme with the statement, "You don't see a lot of billboards out there with fruits and vegetables. You see a lot of fast foods. Put more of the healthy stuff on the billboards." Parents suggested commercials on the channels that their children watch, such as Disney.

² The cookbooks almost became a distraction because once they were handed out, participants did not concentrate on the remainder of the focus group session, reviewing recipe after recipe instead. This issue was quickly addressed by assuring participants that they would receive the cookbook at the end of the focus group session. Since it was not initially anticipated that the cookbooks would be distributed after each focus group session, in the early sessions SOSM staff took the names and addresses of participants who wanted the cookbook and mailed each of them a thank-you note along with a cookbook. Members of focus groups that met later were given cookbooks at the end of the session.



Many respondents proposed taste tests or food demonstrations with healthier recipes as a viable means to introduce more fruits and vegetables into their diets. They liked the idea of seeing the final creation and being able to taste it to determine whether it is something their family would enjoy. As participants made this suggestion, the importance of simple recipes was again voiced.

As I said before, I cook in regards to dump it out of a box or a bag, and some of the neatest things that I've ended up trying were because the grocery store had that little display table. Let's cook it up in the skillet, here, try a sample. Try something like that, "Hey look, we're going to feature these three vegetables. These are three new recipes out of this."

Parents offered a variety of other suggestions, including limiting Food Stamp options to healthy foods; a website that offers printable coupons; testimonials from people who made the change from unhealthy to healthy living and the consequences they had suffered (such as diabetes) as a result of their previously unhealthy lifestyles; cooking activities with children; including children in the nutrition classes at WIC; and in general just having information available so that they can make better choices for their families.

It should be noted that in each of the focus groups, parents enjoyed the opportunity to share recipe ideas, strategies of how to get their children to eat more fruits and vegetables, as well as suggestions on ways to increase physical activity. As the suggestion of having testimonials may indicate, they enjoyed learning from other parents who face similar struggles. In one of the focus groups in Fort Worth, one conversation elicited much interest when one of the participants spoke of a ministry called Angel Food Ministries, which sells boxes of food for \$30.00. She informed the group of all that the ministry has to offer, and that they accept food stamps. This information was met with great interest by others in the group.³

³ Further research by SOSM yielded the website for the ministry at angelfoodministries.com.

